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ABSTRACT

Reconstructing journalism history is as important for contemporary mass communication professionals as it is for scholars and their students because looking at the past from a minority standpoint--in this case women circa the turn of the century--presents social issues which form the background of controversies going on today, such as the argument over abortion. A list of guidelines for achieving more culture-based journalism histories is presented. These include not just recognizing stereotyping and trivialization of women and their activities, but also determining both male management's and female journalists' attitudes toward women; being aware that issues which were segregated to the women's pages of newspapers should be redefined in terms of their meaning and impact on society, both ours and in the past, so that scholars can move away from a front page definition of news; selecting a geographical sample of source material, not just status-based publications such as the "New York Times," and giving alternative publications more importance as source material. Used as an example is press coverage of the 1906 General Federation of Women's Clubs meeting in St. Paul, Minn. The GFWC had a dynamic president, Sarah Platt Decker, who was sophisticated in her view of the press and its role in helping the club movement to grow and to achieve social reforms. Pursuing minority topics in journalism's history should not replace "mainstream" media research. However, the value of such minority focus may diminish in conservative times such as the present and so the rigor and the importance of such scholarly effort must be valued and protected. (Author)

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Ways of Seeing Women:

Challenging Journalism's Past

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ABSTRACT

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Re-constructing journalism history is as important for contemporary mass communication professionals as it is for scholars and their students because looking at the past from a minority standpoint -- in this case women circa the turn of the century -- presents social issues which form the background of controversies going on today, such as the argument over abortion.

A list of guidelines for achieving more culture-based journalism histories is presented. These include not just recognizing stereotyping and trivialization of women and their activities, but also determining both male management's and female journalists' attitudes toward women; being aware that issues which were segregated to the women's pages of newspapers should be redefined in terms of their meaning and impact on society, both ours and in the past so that scholars can move away from a front page definition of news; selecting a geographical sample of source material, not just status-based publications such as the New York Times, and giving alternative publications more importance as source material.

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Pursuing minority topics in journalism's history should not replace "mainstream" media research. However, the value of such minority focus may diminish in conservative times such as the present and so the rigor and the importance of such scholarly effort must be valued and protected.

The academic response to the most recent rebirth of U.S. feminism(1) has largely been one of patching some mention of women and "their interests" into the existing literature of various disciplines. Sociologist Marcia Westcott has appropriately called this the "upholstery" approach: if a discipline's "couch" seems shabby in light of new research reflecting contemporary trends, the solutuion is to cover it with fabric woven in much the same fashion as the old, but with a few strands of new fiber,(2) leaving the same old familiar framework, providing comfort but not the challenge of reconceptualization.

Westcott's metaphor is useful in analyzing literature of many disciplines; the application here is to journalism history. The need for journalism histories which are culture-based rather than reifications of past histories, where mass media gets prominent display and minority journalists as well as alternative media receive little or no mention, has been recognized in recent years.(3)

The call for histories which encompass both majority and minority journalists enhances the position of those who are working toward assembling the scholarship necessary for such books to be written. This enhancement is vital due to the complexity of the challenge faced by researchers trying to include the whole of society on the newly designed "couch" of journalism history because the task, faced realistically, will be brutally painstaking and time consuming. Many decades may pass before scholars assemble enough historiography to form a solid basis for histories which can be truly called reflective of the wide range of media outlets and journalists to adequately re-invent journalism's past to serve our own needs. And, of course, such reinvention is continual since needs change along with society.

One purpose here is to suggest some of the factors which scholars should consider when working toward representing women in journalism history. These points are illustrated with a case study from the Progressive Era to indicate the complexity of accumulating the research necessary for histories with a holistic approach. The case study also reinforces another purpose: the need to remind contemporary news professionals that issues which appear "new" as they are brought into the public forum may have historical precedents which could give context to "new" news.

Some "ways of seeing" when exploring women's past in mass media are:

-- Recognition of the stereotyping, trivialization and even outright hostility toward women's activities and issues on the part of male editors;

-- Determination of management's attitudes toward women as staff members and as subjects for news, because some newspapers, as will be demonstrated, ignored or trivialized issue-centered reporting about women;

-- Acknowledgment of women's roles within the press, where the majority were either women's/society page editors or feature writers;

-- Deliniation of differing attitudes about women and women's issues held by women journalists individually;

-- Exploration of public issues which have not been dealt with by positivist historians(4), generally those issues which may not be important today but, during the time period studied, may have influenced public opinion or either enhanced or damaged women's image;

-- Desertion of a "front page" definition of news since women, as reporters/editors and as subjects, were most often not associated with "hard news;"

-- Selection of a geographically-based sample of publications for original source research as well as circulation- and status-based publications;

-- Recognition of the greater importance alternative publications have for understanding minority audiences and issues due to lack of attention in mainstream media.

Snowbank Baby: A Case Study

Press attention given to the General Federation of Women's Clubs national convention in 1906 provides an illustration of these factors. At that time, the national club movement involved thousands of women who were shaking off the velvet-curtained parlor image and tackling real world issues. Through strength-in-numbers, Federation members were beginning to help provide the "constant stream of support for Progressive legislation"(5) which was to improve the quality of life for millions of Americans and demonstrate to legislators that women did have a voice. Federation membership also acted as a socially acceptable bridge for moderates and conservatives toward the "radical" notion of votes for women which gradually helped broaden the base of support for suffrage.

Club involvement, which seems so harmless to us today, was feared by many. "Allowing" middle-class women to leave the home to organize and deal with public issues was widely considered dangerous to the sanctity of the family. In an article in Ladies Home Journal shortly before the 1906 convention, former President Grover Cleveland criticized the club movement as being dangerous to women and to society as a whole. Some clergymen were not enthusiastic since they feared the weakening of church organizations, in which women played a primary role and were a strong source of fiscal support as the traditional keepers of family conscience. Another public issue involving women was accusing them of "race suicide" for bearing fewer children at a time of great immigrant influx. Public figures of such stature as President Theodore Roosevelt thought women of the "American race" -- those who were white and not recent immigrants -- were neglecting their primary obligation as child bearers.(6) These biases coupled with another: the idea that women were responsible for press sensationalism. Associated Press general manager Melville E. Stone was reported to have told a women's club in Chicago women were responsible for "the present craze for yellow journalism."(7)

Club women had a champion in their national president, Sarah Platt Decker from Denver, who masterfully combined combativeness with diplomacy as she traveled the nation, urging women to join clubs and club women to gain a sense of self worth by actively participating in reform movements. Decker recognized the value of press coverage and, since she "made good copy," she received attention from the press. Taking on Roosevelt about the "race suicide" issue, she condemned the President's "much applauded slogan" as being "short-sighted, thoughtless, mistaken and directly opposed to the betterment of the nation through its coming generation...."(8) And, following Stone's remark, she called a national meeting of club editors to encourage the women to do their part to better press relations and get stories about the club effort into newspapers. She was indignantly aware of the mass media's attempt to trivialize what club women were doing, saying publicly that she was "not satisfied with the reports given of our club meetings -- our gowns are described, the public is informed of the color or our eyes and hair and our weight, but not a word of what we say."(9)

Also, since Decker was from Colorado where women had the vote, she was active in matters which seemed highly political and public to women from more conservative parts of the country. Articles about Decker, particularly in the Eastern press, reflect a tone of curiousity about this woman who could speak so compellingly, behaved in a perfect gentlewoman's style and yet was a politically active voter too. Two years earlier, for example, Decker's own Denver Women's Club had been the only "establishment" group in the city to support the re-election of Judge Ben Lindsay who later became nationally acclaimed for his juvenile court reforms and his concern about child labor.(10) The Denver papers seem to have treated clubs, and Decker in particular, in a straightforward if not deferential style. As a result, she knew what good coverage could be as well as what it meant in terms of promotion of the club movement.

Decker believed the club movement deserved a place on the national agenda and so she was not above pointedly recruiting press women to the GFWC cause. One newswoman whose life and professional career was affected by Decker was Rheta Childe Dorr, who, as woman's editor for the New York Evening Post, was in a position to give the GFWC the sort of press treatment Decker wanted from all newspapers. Dorr was the first woman ever employed by the Post, a reflection of management's begrudging attitude that women were making news and, more importantly, to the business office's enthusiastic recognition of women as consumers. In her autobiography, A Woman of Fifty(11), Dorr recalls the only praise she received came from the money men -- they thought her women's pages were drawing advertisers and readers.

Male management's neglect of the women's page for the "important" news and "real" stories can be seen as being of some benefit to the club movement and women journalists like Dorr. As long as Dorr did the required fashion and food news, she was virtually free from editorial guidelines and could fill her pages as she liked. And so, the women's page of the Post from the time she was hired in 1902 until she resigned in mid-1906 became a digest of women's activities and issues -- women advocating causes such as consumerism, temperance, settlement houses, trade unionism; women being elected to office in those few Western states which had enfranchised them; women continuing their efforts to get the vote, and, much to the satisfaction of activists such as Decker, literally yards of type about the GFWC, including a great many stories about Decker, whom Dorr first met at the 1902 convention in Atlantic City.

When she became GFWC president Decker appointed Dorr chair of the GFWC Industrial Committee which investigated women's employment, working conditions and pay. And so, Dorr attended the week-long 1906 convention both as journalist and as a member of the Federation executive committee.(12) Dorr's direct involvement in the subject she was covering was not unusual during the Progressive Era, since participation in reform efforts was rather like a badge journalists wore proudly.

Thus, while Dorr was covering the news, she was also making it. When she delivered her committee's report, her strong voice carried a strident and, considering her audience, radical appeal for clubwomen to abandon the old-fashioned charity approach to social problems and support fair wages and trade unions for working women. In the course of her talk, which was followed by an emotional presentation from young factory workers, she even suggested socialism as a solution.

In addition to Dorr and several reporters from the Twin Cities papers, official press representatives were primarily from the West and Midwest: Colorado, Texas, Illinois, Kansas, Michigan, Nebraska and Iowa. The East's only other representatives were Ella Richards for a Boston-based news syndicate and a writer for Women's Home Companion. Judging from the Denver Women's Club scrapbooks of Decker's term in office,(13) which provide a panorama of press coverage, and from knowledge of the background of various women journalists in the Progressive Era, a number of other presswomen attended as delegates and/or officers of their clubs.

Contemporary analysis of convention coverage by the St. Paul and Minneapolis papers supports the statement which appeared in a post-convention edition of the GFWC offical organ, the Federation Bulletin:

> Never before has the local press distinguished itself as in this session. We mean by this not simply the thoroughness of the reports and the accuracy for which one so often looks in vain.... In this case we refer to something more than mere accuracy and that is the absence of all trivial and flippant references to the proceedings as though they were something which might be assumed to be chiefly amusing because they were conducted by women. The days of such insufferable arrogance have long since passed by, but there are numerous cities in America which have not yet found it out.(14)

However, Elizabeth Sears of the Omaha World-Herald pointed out an incident of "insufferable arrogance" in her column, "With the Women's Clubs," after the convention. She was referring to stories written by a couple of male reporters from Chicago, one representing the Tribune and the other the Record-Herald. From the fact of the papers' assigning reporters to the

convention some possible conclusions could be drawn: perhaps the editors had decided the national meeting was a legitimate news source; Chicago club women had pressured the editors into such a view, or wives of newspaper management were club women. Another possibility is that the "woman as novelty and amusement" approach -- the one so disliked by Decker and the GFWC leadership -- was the motive. Sears deplored the reporters' performance:

> The enterprising young men who represented the Chicago papers deliberately faked almost every story they sent it.... They argued that they were not writing for the club women but for the public at large (which)...demanded something spicy. And they acknowledged candidly that it was difficult in this convention to even get a small basis of incident upon which to build up their spicy fabrications.(15)

An example of this fabrication can be seen in a front page Tribune story inspired by a workshop on infant care, during which the Chicago woman presenting the program recommended fresh air for infants. Sears' said the reporters' versions of the workshop were "so manifestly untrue that even the reporters themselves did not dream it would be taken seriously." The Tribune story demonstrates that some newspapers had little concern about accuracy, at least when covering women's activisim. The workshop, a demonstration, bland and routine even by the standards of the day, included the recommendation that babies could benefit from fresh air even in the winter and was, according to Sears, "nothing new...many mothers have been wheeling their babies to the sunny side of the porch for a nap even in the cold winter weather for years."

"Frost Your Babe, Mothers (sic) Advice" read the headline on what became known among convention delegates as the "snowbank baby" story. "Mothers...are told to begin putting them (babies) to sleep on a snowbank wrapped carefully in warm woolen clothes..." or, mothers suffering insomnia could allow "their

heirs apparent to spend the night on the back porch" since "the lower the mercury is...the stronger baby will become."(16) The continuation of the story on page 2 appeared under a two-column picture of President Decker, fulfilling her opinion that much of the press was more interested in appearance than in content.

However, Dorr's speech, while not front-paged, was not "faked" and did receive prominent and, comparing the news story with her text, quite accurate treatment in the Tribune.(17) Perhaps what she had to say about unions and socialism was considered outrageous enough to rate a "spicy" grade from the editors. There is also the possibility that the reporters were extending professional courtesy to one of their own.

Discussion

Although the "snowbank baby" coverage was indeed less than satisfactory in terms of fairness, at least some measure of validity was given to the Federation if only through daily attention in two Chicago papers. On the other hand, the New York Times ran two articles during the convention, both short, both trivializing the meeting: the first "Lost Her Report," was a "chuckle" about a delegate doing just that, and the second gave only the conservative side of the working woman issue.(18) Regarding the latter, a delegate from St. Louis, in response to the presentation by factory workers, told the young women they should go back to being servant girls instead of working for wages, because women such as she and her friends were having problems finding domestic live-in help.

This is at the same time that Adolph Ochs, according to popular journalism historical theory, was guiding the Times to greatness.(19) Apparently his editorial policy "to give the news, all the news...impartially"

and provide a "forum for the consideration of all questions of public importance..." seems to have precluded activisim on the part of women from the category of "importance." Brevity and omission were not due to space limitations, certainly, since the Times was full of such stories as "Society at Home and Abroad" and "Seasonable Gowns."

Even though Ochs was attracting the same type of upper and upper-middle class readers as the Evening Post, and had a detailed society section which could well have included club reporting, the Times seems to have made no attempt to avoid the "wasp-waisted indictment" of women," as a Federation Bulletin writer termed newspapers' incessant focus on fashion directed toward women.(20) A close examination of the Post's and the Times' management might indicate some factors in their personal backgrounds which would bias the papers' coverage of women in one way or the other.(21) For example, Ochs' wife seems to have been his "helpmate" and not an activist in her own right.(22)

The implications of the Times' lack of coverage about women's issues other than "society" stories is compounded when access and veneration are considered. The Times quite probably is the single most available newspaper for historical research done both by students and professors. And, its excellence today offers the facile chance to consider it always excellent in every way.

Another method of analysis is to look at the women who were hired. As has been pointed out, indifference on the part of management allowed Dorr comparative freedom to write about issues as long as she kept the required homemaking and fashion stories. Other "women's interests" editors could -- and probably did -- agree with the "high society only" way of covering the "feminine scene" or in the "rosy glow" of reporting only the good and not

acknowledging the negative. Indeed, in the sample available, Sears seems to have been the only women's editor to point out the shabby Chicago coverage. The other post-convention stories vary in tone from straight-forward accounts of what occurred to praise for the GFWC. This suggests that differences among the women themselves could be as important as analyzing their editors' professional and private lives, although more difficult to determine. The literature of men in journalism vs. women in journalism is tilted heavily to the male side, simply reflecting reality. More men were in the business and more stayed, climbing career ladders to positions of prominence which eventually translated into biographies and auto-biographies. With women journalists, the ladder only had a few rungs, if any, so newswomen were more transient -- tiring of the women's page "ghetto" they would move on to different press outlets, as Dorr did; get married; leave the news business entirely, or, in order to be part of a prestigious paper, settle for such limited participation as "a 30-year stint in the book review section."(23)

Tracking down the past's version of women's activisim as well as women journalists must involve a commitment to plowing through original sources, not just of general circulation newspapers but also of interest-centered publications such as the GFWC Bulletin.

However, thinking newswomen's perceptions of what constituted news differed substantially from men's is a trap to be avoided. A better construct is to see women journalists' ideas of news and social issues as possibly more inclusive than men's. After all, men were first in line at the social issues buffet; women took the leftovers and knew it. Women like Dorr as the professional and Decker as the activist cognizant of the need for press attention understood the criteria for "real news" with its page one definition established by male tradition and decision. But they also could discern that

social reform promoted by women, which may not have been widely nor very accurately reported and for the most part was excluded from the "real news" sections, deserved serious coverage.(24)

Even so narrow a case study as this demonstrates how research functions as a vehicle for getting a more accurate picture of issues which were part of the cultural context in the past. Broadening the scope of the media's past is as important to contemporary communication professionals as it is to academicians and their students. For example, perhaps journalists today could better view the abortion haggling if they were aware of the "race suicide" argument against birth control of eighty years ago. Other issues emerge from this study: comparable worth through the struggle of working women to earn equitable pay; the concept of an identifiable social group not being united on issues such as women opposing other women as in the "servant girl" issue; women's ambiguous stance over voting, compared to presenting the passage of suffrage as though all women were unified on that point; women organizing to achieve a national identity as a form of networking which the mass media of today treats as something new; newswomen's tenuous position in the profession where rising to the management level was just impossible (except through inheritence or marriage) compared to being just difficult today; complaints of the trivialization of women and their poor treatment in "straight" news reports, a complaint which is still made.

Summary

This look at the 1906 GFWC convention as an example for application of the guidelines suggested earlier is only a skimming of the surface of one event; comparing this to the thorough research on women's news image and women journalists indicates what remains to be done. To insist journalism

histories include minutia such as the spotty and inequitable coverage of a single GFWC convention would be foolish. But, even so limited a case study demonstrates the rigor of searching original sources for a picture of press performance. More importantly, such a study suggests social and press issues which have been ignored by mainstream journalism historians.

The re-defining research in journalism history which has been done and is on-going will not be enough if such research results only in the publishing of books and articles about special populations which generally are directed to special audiences. Such histories are welcome and necessary but the challenge lies in finding and taking these isolated parts of journalistic participation and coverage and building a broad new structure for journalism history.

Academic and professional commitment to the importance of this kind of historical research is vital especially in dangerous, fragile times such as now, when the popular notion of "make mine Main Street, U.S.A." may entice or force scholars to return to majority issues. If that happens with minority status in journalism historiography, a lifetime -- or several --- may pass and then future generations will wonder why the exploration of and writing about such issues was allowed to fade away.

Another caution, though, is to not lose sight of the very real, demonstrable fact that majority media as institutions were and are very powerful and, as such, still need to be studied and understood, both past and present. Incorporating an over-abundance of minority-group research into the general histories of mass media so that the power structures are underplayed would be equally as damaging as omitting the cultural approach is already. Striking the balance is and will remain the challenge of journalism historians.

NOTES

1. American feminism seems to emerge periodically rather than enjoy the status of a long-held national value. At each emergence, the mass media seems surprised to "discover feminism." Something must surely be missing from the eduction of journalists when they do not know feminism, American style, reaches back to a 19th Century journalist, Margaret Fuller.

2. From an address, "Women and the Social Sciences," by Marcia Westcott, April 3, 1981, University of North Dakota given as part of the UND Women's Equity Committee series on women's scholarship. See also, Westcott, "Feminist Criticism of the Social Sciences," Harvard Educational Review, 49:4, (November 1979), pp. 442-30.

3. James W. Carey, "The Problem of Journalism History," Journalism History 1:1 (Spring 1974); Marion Marzolf, "American Studies: Ideas for Journalism Historians," Journalism History, 5:1 (Spring 1978); John D. Stevens and Hazel Dicken Garcia, Communication History, (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1981).

4. Edwin Emery and Michael Emery, The Press and America: An Interpretative History of the Mass Media, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1984). More than three-fourths of the over 250 schools and departments of journalism/communication surveyed in 1977 were using the Emery text in their history courses. (Fred F. Endres, "Philosophies, Practices and Problems in Teaching Journalism History," Journalism History, 5:1 [Spring 1978], p. 2). This text, fits the upholstery metaphor: women and women's issues are patched in. However, considerably more women are portrayed in the fifth edition of this text than in the fourth, published in 1978, reflecting both the increased scholarship on women and journalism and the authors' commitment to its inclusion. The text does reflect a "women were journalists too" attitude rather than realistically take on the cultural factors which inhibited their participation, promotion and use as news topics.

5. William H. Chafe, The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic and Political Roles, 1920-1970, (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 17.

6. "A Letter from President Roosevelt on Race Suicide," in Review of Reviews, 35:550:1 (May 1907). See also Roosevelt's preface to The Woman Who Toils: Being the Experiences of Two Ladies As Factory Girls by Bessie and Marie Von Vorst, (New York: Doubleday, Page and Co., 1903).

7. References to Cleveland's and Stone's remarks are found in the Sarah Platt Decker 1906 volume of press clippings. Unfortunately, many of the clippings are not marked with the newspaper, city and specific date. The research presented here was not in-depth enough to cover all the points raised in the historical case study. In response to Stone's allegation, Decker called a meeting of club editors from around the nation for Sept. 16, 1906. "Criticism Arouses Mrs. Sarah P. Decker," unlabeled clip, Decker scrapbooks, courtesy Denver Women's Club.

8. Portland Oregonian, Nov. 4, 1906, Decker scrapbooks.

9. "Gives Too Much Notice of the Hair and Dress," from a Denver paper 1906, Decker scrapbooks.

10. Louis Filler, The Muckrakers, (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1939, 1976), p. 266.

11. Rheta Childe Dorr, A Woman of Fifty, (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1924), p. 97.

12. Various articles by Dorr about industrial conditions for women workers appeared in The Federation Bulletin, a monthly publication, during 1905 and 1906.

13. The Decker scrapbooks, faithfully kept, one presumes, by a member of the Denver Woman's Club during their most famous member's presidency or by Decker herself provide a wonderful cross-section of newspapers articles from various parts of the country. Decker traveled the entire nation during her term and differences in her message as well as coverage can be seen in the clippings. When she was in Southern states, for example, she talked about the benefits of club membership since belonging to a club, much less becoming a social cause advocate, was perceived very suspiciously by Southern ladies and their gentlemen. In areas where the club movement was well established, Decker talked about social reform and even the right to vote.

14. The Federation Bulletin, 3:9 (June 1906), p. 435.

15. Omaha World-Herald, June 10, 1906.

16. "Frost Your Babe, Mothers (sic) Advice," Chicago Tribune, June 6, 1906. [Apparently, in addition to sensationalists, the editors weren't very careful with their spelling either.]

17. "Women Assail Industrial Wrongs, Plead for Better Conditions," Tribune, June 5, 1906, p. 8.

18. Stories appear in the New York Times June 2 and June 5, 1906, each on page 5.

19. Michael Schudson, Discovering the News: A Social History of the News, (New York, Basic Books, 1978), pp. 117-19.

20. Federation Bulletin, 3:5 (February 1906), 211.

21. Susan Henry, "Private Lives: An Added Dimension for Understanding Journalism History," Journalism History 6:1 (Winter

22. "The Proprietor of the New York Times," Hampton's, XXIV:6 (June 1910), p. 864.

23. Emery and Emery, op. cit., p. 265 .

24. For another consideration of this point, see the late Cathy Covert's article, "Journalism History and Woman's Experience: A Problem in Conceptual Change," Journalism History, 8:1 (Spring 1981), pp. 2-5.